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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BOGOTA 004050

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR UNDER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR
POLICY DOUGLAS J. FEITH

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons
1.5 (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (C) The GOC and embassy welcome Under Secretary Feith's visit with enthusiasm. The Bilateral Working Group (BWG) will hold defense policy discussions on policy, modernization, and narcoterrorism. Colombia faces a four front war -- narcos, FARC, ELN, paramilitaries -- and a growing concern about Venezuela. With U.S. assistance, it is fighting each of the fronts with a slightly different mix of political, military, and police measures, all of which are expensive and at times controversial. A multi-phased offensive by the security forces has re-taken key territory from the FARC. The paramilitary peace process has led to the demobilization of almost 5,000 with several thousand more expected. Three U.S. citizens have been held hostage by the FARC for two years now; their safe recovery continues to be one of our top priorities. Colombia's human rights record, although imperfect, is improving. A bill to allow presidential re-election is pending Constitutional Court review. The economy is improving slowly. Five U.S. military personnel, who had immunity, were arrested in late March for transporting drugs. End Summary.

Bilateral Working Group

2. (C) The Ministry of Defense has expressed interest in a special bilateral security agreement. The BWG general session will provide an opportunity to explore this opportunity. We hope it will also provide a mechanism to obtain a SOFA/SFA agreement.

U.S. Assistance Key to Security Improvements

3. (C) USG Assistance to Colombia is premised on combating the interrelated issues of drug trafficking and terrorism and includes training, material aid, and guidance to the security forces and other institutions. President Uribe and Colombian Minister of Defense (MOD) Jorge Uribe (not related) have characterized the United States as Colombia's most important ally. Since taking office, President Uribe has focused on establishing a state presence throughout national territory.

-- Plan Patriota: The military's multi-phased campaign plan to re-take areas dominated by the FARC is entering its third year and focused on traditional FARC strongholds in southeastern Colombia. The logistical strain of keeping 15,500 troops in the dense, hostile jungle, hundreds of miles from their supply bases, is a huge challenge. The priority for DOD funding is to provide assistance for forces involved in Plan Patriota. Infectious diseases -- especially leishmaniasis, a parasitic skin and intestinal infection -- and landmines are the leading causes of military casualties. The GOC is seeking U.S. assistance for the high cost of leishmaniasis treatment.

-- FARC violence in the first quarter of 2005, although tactically aggressive, remained localized and below 2004 levels. The FARC attacked at least four indigenous towns in Cauca Department in mid April. The attacks were partially directed at local police stations, but civilians were indiscriminately killed.

-- Joint Caribbean Command: The military recently created a joint command for the Caribbean coastal region. The commander will have operational command of over 40,000 Army troops, 10,000 sailors and marines, and elements of the Air Force. The new command could lead to additional joint commands in other key areas.

-- The Uribe administration and Armed Forces Commander General Ospina have pushed the security forces to change out-dated thinking and focus on modernization and jointness. On April 27, four senior Army officers -- the Deputy Army Commander, Inspector General, Operations Chief, and Personnel

Chief -- were dismissed in part because of their unwillingness to cooperate with joint command structures.

-- Center for Coordinated Integral Action: With support from the U.S. MILGRP, the GOC formed an interagency center to facilitate social services in seven areas that have traditionally suffered from little state presence and pressure from illegal armed groups. Approximately 40,000 individuals have been enrolled in state health care, and judges, investigators, and public defenders have been placed in all 16 municipalities of the Plan Patriota area.

-- Drug Eradication: cooperation remains excellent, complicated at times by competition for scarce helicopters between the counter-terror and counter-drug priorities. Eradication and interdiction are at record levels. Some 60,500 hectares of coca and 900 hectares of opium poppy have been sprayed since the beginning of the year and 1,300 hectares of coca and poppy were manually eradicated. In 2004, over 136,000 hectares of coca and 3,000 hectares of poppy were sprayed, and almost 200 metric tons of cocaine and cocaine base were seized inside Colombia. Ground fire against spray planes is below 2003 levels but remains problematic.

-- Deserters: Since Uribe took office, almost 7,000 illegal armed group members have deserted and entered the government's reinsertion program. The program has limited funding and weak management, but is slowly improving.

-- Military Justice Reforms: The Colombian military justice system has traditionally been plagued with impunity and inefficiency. We continually press the Defense Ministry to create a system that delivers credible findings to ensure expeditious justice for both the innocent and the guilty. Director of Military Justice Brigadier General Puentes has proposed a two-phase reform strategy to address these problems.

Growing Concern About Venezuela

14. (C) Colombia-Venezuela relations deteriorated further after FARC international spokesman Rodrigo Granda was captured in Caracas. We have stressed the importance of regional counter-terror and counter-drug cooperation, a major theme of last month's summit among Presidents Chavez, Lula, Zapatero, and Uribe. Colombia remains concerned about Venezuela's arms build-up, and is tempted to divert needed resources away from counter-drug and counter-terror priorities. Colombia has proposed a closer bilateral defense relationship as a partial solution

Peace Process

15. (C) The GOC has been holding negotiations with the AUC since 2002. Almost 5,000 paramilitaries have demobilized and several thousand more are expected. Congress is debating a law that would give alternative sentences to members of illegal armed groups who are implicated in major crimes and demobilize. The GOC has repeatedly assured us that the peace process will not damage the excellent U.S.-Colombia extradition relationship. Despite limited resources, the GOC has made an effort to prevent the FARC from taking over former AUC territory. We have not seen evidence of a concerted FARC effort to target demobilized paramilitaries or former AUC territory. Nevertheless, local communities and the GOC continue to express concern about their capacity to secure areas if more AUC groups demobilize.

16. (C) In a related peace process, the ELN rejected Mexican facilitation on April 18, ostensibly over the GOM's vote against Cuba at the UN Commission on Human Rights. The ELN has only about 2,000 members and is no longer a military threat, although it can execute terrorist attacks. The FARC has shown no willingness to have peace talks or hold a "humanitarian exchange."

U.S. Hostages

17. (C) The three U.S. contractors captured by the FARC in February 2003 are now the longest U.S. terror captives in the world. Their safe release continues to be one of our top priorities. The Colombians are providing full assistance. Plan Patriota operations have increased the likelihood that we will receive more information about the hostages, but also that an unintended encounter between Colombian forces and the hostage holders will result in their execution. Uribe has assured us that the U.S. hostages will be included in any possible humanitarian exchange.⁸

Human Rights Record Improving

18. (C) The Uribe Administration continues to make progress in human rights, but needs to do more to ensure accountability, strengthen the military justice system, break military ties to paramilitary groups, and end corruption. The government has a difficult but active dialogue with NGOs, the United Nations, and foreign governments. Human rights training is mandatory for all members of the military and police. The GOC claims to have trained 100,000 officials in the past year and a half. Less than two percent of human rights violations are attributable to government security forces, according to GOC statistics. Homicides fell by 16 percent, kidnappings by 42 percent, and forced displacements by 37 percent in 2004, building on 2003's trends.

Internal Politics

19. (C) Constitutional reform to permit Presidential re-election was approved by Congress and is facing a review by the Constitutional Court. Executive-legislative relations have been tense over the last two years. In addition to the demobilization law, major issues before Congress include pension and tax reform, both controversial proposals that face tough sledding. Elections for Congress and President will be held in March and May 2006, respectively. The current Congressional session began March 16 and runs until June 20.

Positive Economic Outlook

110. (U) While the tremendous gains in security have helped the economy, many analysts are concerned that fiscal and pension reforms have not yet passed through Congress. Without these important structural changes, the long-term outlook is less clear. In 2004, Colombia's gross domestic product (GDP) increased by 4 percent to nearly USD 90.8 billion. Colombian exports grew 26 percent in 200 to USD 16 billion. Exports to the U.S. grew by USD 1 billion. Unemployment remains high at 12.1 percent, but the rate has been declining since the beginning of the Uribe administration.

111. (U) The ninth round of free trade talks was in Lima, Peru on April 18 to 22. President Uribe remains a strong proponent. The Colombians are concerned that their congressional and national elections in 2006 will block approval if agreement waits too long. Agriculture continues to be a major issue. Our goal of conclusion by early summer 2005 is uncertain.

Five Americans Arrested

112. (C) On March 30, 35 pounds of cocaine were found on a U.S. military plane that left Colombia for Fort Bliss. Three U.S. military personnel temporarily stationed in Colombia, who had immunity, and two in the U.S. were arrested for transporting drugs to the U.S. on military aircraft. One has been released, while the investigation continues on the others. We are working closely with Colombian authorities to ensure that the case is fully investigated and that those guilty are held accountable.

WOOD